

# Birding western Angola

Ian Sinclair<sup>a</sup>, Claire Spottiswoode<sup>b,c</sup>, Callan Cohen<sup>b,d</sup>, Michael Mills<sup>b,d</sup>,  
Rodney Cassidy<sup>e</sup>, Pedro vaz Pinto<sup>f</sup> & Peter Ryan<sup>d</sup>

**Observer les oiseaux en Angola occidental.** Après avoir été inaccessible pendant pratiquement trente ans à cause de la guerre civile qui a ravagé le pays suite au départ des Portugais en 1974, certaines parties de l'Angola occidentale peuvent à nouveau être visitées par des ornithologues. Les auteurs, qui ont effectué un nombre de courtes visites entre mars 2001 et novembre 2003, présentent les sites relativement sûrs et accessibles le long de l'escarpement occidental et la plaine côtière avoisinante, notamment le Parc national de Quiçama (Province de Bengo), la zone de Gabela (Cuanza Sul), le Mont Moco (Huambo) et Tundavala (Huila). Cette région comprend une Zone d'Endémisme d'Oiseaux qui compte 14 espèces à répartition restreinte, dont 12 sont menacées, et plusieurs espèces quasi-endémiques. Parmi les premières, les auteurs ont pu observer 12 des 14 espèces, dont le Francolin à bandes grises *Francolinus griseostriatus*, le Rougegorge de Gabela *Sheppardia gabela*, le Cossyphe des grottes *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*, le Nasique de Pulitzer *Macrosphenus pulitzeri*, le Gobemouche de l'Angola *Melaenornis brunneus*, le Pririt à front blanc *Platysteira albifrons*, le Gladiateur de Monteiro *Malaconotus monteiri*, le Gonolek de l'Angola *Laniarius amboimensis*, et le Bagadais de Gabela *Prionops gabela*. Des renseignements sont également fournis sur d'autres espèces locales intéressantes, telles que le Touraco pauline *Tauraco erythrolophus*, le Coliou à dos marron *Colius castanotus*, et le Souimanga d'Oustalet *Cinnyris oustaleti*.

Angola is one of Africa's most diverse countries, with habitats ranging from the gravel plains of the Namib, one of the world's driest deserts, to the rainforests of Cabinda and the Congo Basin. As a result, it supports a wealth of birds, with a country list of at least 920 species (Dean 2000, Dean *et al.* 2002). For birders the key attraction is the 14 range-restricted species that define the Western Angola Endemic Bird Area (Dean 2001), and several other near-endemics. These species have been inaccessible for much of the last three decades due to the protracted civil war that erupted in 1974, following the withdrawal of the Portuguese. Many of these key species are restricted to fragments of scarp and Afromontane forest scattered in the highland area of western Angola (Hall 1960). Given the lack of recent information concerning the status of these species, 12 of the 14 range-restricted species are listed as globally threatened (BirdLife International 2000).

The western highlands of Angola rise abruptly from a narrow coastal plain, and are isolated to the east by the vast, predominantly miombo-covered central plateau. They reach their highest point at Mt Moco, Angola's tallest

peak, at 2,582 m, and are characterised by spectacular inselbergs. Dense woodland cloaks the

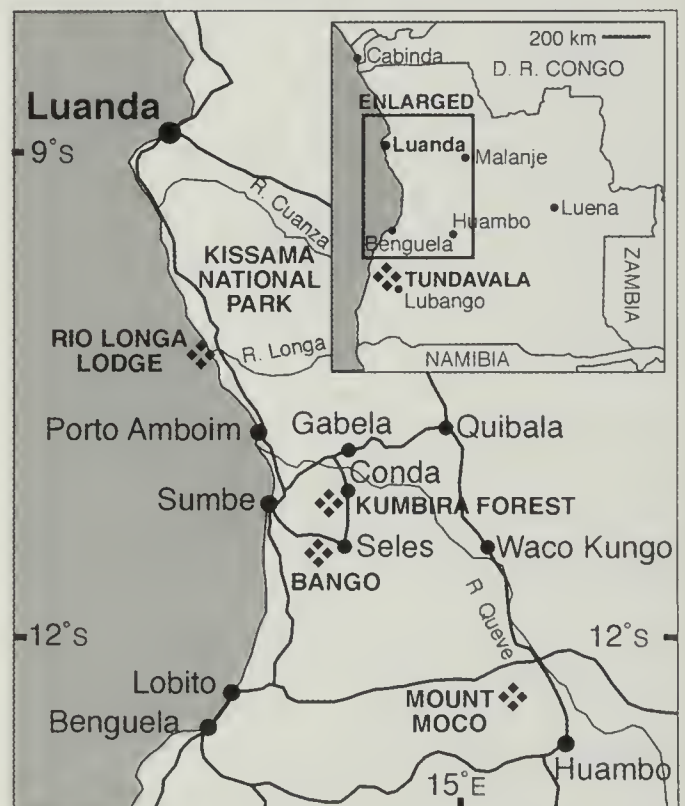


Figure 1. Sites in western Angola described in the text.  
Sites en Angola occidentale présentés dans cet article.

lower slopes of the scarp, with a mosaic of grassland, open woodland and forest on the higher peaks. In addition to the many endemics, the highland forests are of considerable biogeographic interest as they support populations of many species otherwise restricted to the Afromontane forests that extend along the highland chain from Eritrea and the Albertine Rift, through the Eastern Arc Mountains to the Cape. Many of the isolated Angolan populations are quite distinctive (e.g. **Yellow-bellied Waxbill** *Coccopygia quartinia bocagei*, **Bronzy Sunbird** *Nectarinia kilimensis gadowi*) and future research may well prove them to be species, boosting the area's number of endemics.

The coastal lowlands are also well worth birding. The coastal plain grades from desert in the extreme south, through arid *Euphorbia* scrub with dwarf baobabs, to mesic savanna and woodland in the north. It provides an intriguing array of birds, mixing species characteristic of the south-west arid zone with others more typical of the West African littoral. The entire mix is spiced-up by a few species virtually restricted to Angola, notably **Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush** *Cichladusa ruficauda*, **White-fronted Wattle-eye** *Platysteira albifrons*, **Golden-backed Bishop** *Euplectes aureus* and **Cinderella Waxbill** *Estrilda thomensis*, although the wattle-eye and waxbill also occur higher up the scarp at some sites.

The avifauna of western Angola is fairly well documented, through extensive collections by Dr A. A. da Rosa Pinto and the British Museum expedition led by B. P. Hall. Sadly, the golden days (for ornithology) of the 1950s and 1960s ended abruptly in 1974, when civil war effectively curtailed further exploration. BirdLife International made a valiant effort to assess the state of the escarpment forests and to commence a conservation programme during the 1992 ceasefire, but were thwarted by the latter's short duration. Much of our knowledge of the avifauna, based largely on specimen data, has been recently summarised (Dean 2000). However, the death of the UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi, in February 2002 resulted in a more lasting peace, once again permitting adventurous birders access to at least parts of Angola.

In this article, we describe birding at sites known to be relatively safe and accessible along

the western scarp and adjacent coastal plain (Fig. 1). The information is based on a series of short visits to Kissama National Park, Bengo Province (IS in March 2001, May 2002, RC in November 2003), the Gabela area of Cuanza Sul (IS and PR in February 2003, CS, CC and MM in October 2003, and RC in November 2003), Mt Moco in Huambo Province (RC in November 2003) and Tundavala in Huila Province (RC in October 2003).

#### Captions to plates on pages 154 & 155

Figure 1. Lagoon at Rio Longa Lodge, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode) / Lagune près du Rio Longa Lodge, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 2. Highlands around Conda, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode) / Zone de haute altitude aux environs de Conda, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 3. Angola Cave Chat *Xenocopsychus ansorgei* habitat, Mount Njelo, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode) / Habitat du Cossyphe des grottes *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*, Mont Njelo, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 4. Angola Cave Chat / Cossyphe des grottes *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figures 5–6. Kumbira Forest, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode) / Forêt de Kumbira, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 7. Pulitzer's Longbill *Macrospheus pulitzeri*, near Bango, west of Seles, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode) / Nasique de Pulitzer *Macrospheus pulitzeri*, près de Bango, à l'ouest de Seles, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 8. Forest Scrub Robin / Agrobate du Ghana *Cercotrichas leucosticta*, Kumbira Forest, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 9. Falkenstein's Greenbul / Bulbul de Falkenstein *Chlorocichla falkensteini*, Kumbira Forest, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 10. Brown-chested Alethe / Alèthe à poitrine brune *Alethe poliocephala*, Kumbira Forest, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 11. Angola Slaty Flycatcher / Gobemouche de l'Angola *Melaenornis brunneus*, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 12. Red-backed Mousebird / Coliou à dos marron *Colius castanotus*, Angola (Claire Spottiswoode)

Figure 13. Monteiro's Bush-shrike / Gladiateur de Monteiro *Malaconotus montei*, Angola (Callan Cohen)







Captions are on page 153



## Luanda and Kissama National Park

Most birders are likely to access the country via Luanda. This sprawling capital city, home to some five million people (almost half the country's population), lies on the coast 900 km south of the equator. It offers few birding opportunities, but the large brown swifts breeding in buildings along the waterfront probably are **Fernando Po Swifts** *Apus [barbatus] sladeniae*, an extremely poorly known species only recorded from a few localities in Angola, Bioko and the highlands of south-west Cameroon. Luanda Bay, and the vast lagoon formed by Mussulo peninsula that extends 37 km south-west of the city, are worth a look for the many waders and other waterbirds. The southern end is especially productive and can be viewed from the main road south.

Kissama National Park (often spelled Quiçama), 75 km south of Luanda, has been open to tourists for the last few years. It lies on the coastal plain between the Kissama and Longa rivers, and is a good base to see most of the coastal plain species. Probably the best birding is in riparian forest and thicket, concentrated along the main rivers, which is home to several Angolan endemics, including **Red-backed Mousebird** *Colius castanotus* and **White-fronted Wattle-eye**, as well as near-endemics such as the scarce **Pale Olive Greenbul** *Phyllastrephus fulviventris* and more abundant **Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush**. **Angola Batis** *Batis minulla* and **Swamp Boubou** *Laniarius bicolor* also occur in the riparian corridors, whereas **Bubbling Cisticola** *Cisticola bulliens* is common in a broad range of habitats throughout. Watch out overhead for 'Loanda' Swift *Apus [horus] toulsoni*, especially along the large rivers. **Brown Sunbird** *Anthreptes gabonicus* occurs in mangroves at the mouth of the Kissama River, considerably further south than previously thought. Some of the larger gallery forests nearer the interior of the park also support small numbers of **Red-crested Turacos** *Tauraco erythrolophus*, but this species is much easier found elsewhere. The real star of the show is the **Grey-striped Francolin** *Francolinus griseostriatus*, which is locally common, but rather elusive. The best way to see one is to employ a local guide from the park's main camp. They imitate the bird's whistling call, and either lure them into the

open from the dense grass or at least ensure a view as the birds flush. Accommodation is also available at Rio Longa Lodge on the southern border of the park.

Kissama may also provide birders with the stunning **Golden-backed Bishop**, but failing this it can be looked for further south along the Gabela road that runs inland along the Keve (or Cuvo) River, or still further south along the road from Tsumbe to Seles. Small flocks occur in well-grassed savannas and in rank vegetation at the margins of wetlands, but they are easily overlooked if the males are not in breeding plumage. **Slender-billed Weavers** *Ploceus pelzelni* also are fairly common along the floodplain of the Keve River. Some arid-country species, more typically associated with northern Namibia, also occur in Kissama. **Rüppell's Parrot** *Poicephalus rueppellii* is quite common, but other species apparently reach their northern limit further south on the coastal plain, including **Bare-cheeked Babbler** *Turdoides gymnogenys*, which is unknown north of Sumbe (Dean 2000).

## Gabela

For birders, Gabela is one of the most recognisable Angolan names, with three bird species taking their names from the small town: **Gabela Akalat** *Sheppardia gabela*, **Gabela Bush-shrike** *Laniarius amboimensis* and **Gabela Helmet-shrike** *Prionops gabela*. All three are confined to a small area of western Cuanza Sul Province. The town is reached from the main coastal road via a rather indifferent tarmac road that runs inland from a point c.20 km north of Sumbe and follows the Keve River. Shortly after crossing the spectacular Keve Falls, the road degenerates as it starts to ascend the escarpment, chewed up by the procession of heavy trucks carrying agricultural produce to Luanda. The road passes through some fairly impressive-looking forest, which supports a reasonable diversity of forest species, but apparently few of the key endemics. This forest peters out before Gabela town. Further exploration may well locate other remnant patches, but we found the best area to be Kumbira Forest, reached by turning south to Conda at mile 17 on the Gabela Road.

## Kumbira

Kumbira Forest cloaks the western flank of Njelo Mountain, a long rocky ridge running south-west of Conda. The forest, most of which was selectively logged prior to the civil war, is at 800–1,000 m elevation, above which the slopes are covered in lightly treed grassland interspersed with rocky outcrops. Below the forest is a mixture of subsistence agriculture and now-derelict shade-coffee plantations. This site supports all the Western Angolan scarp endemics except Swierstra's Francolin *Francolinus swierstrai* and Braun's Bush-shrike *Laniarius brauni*. It is reached from Conda, along a track that leaves Conda on its north-west side and skirts the northern end of Njelo Mountain. The track enters secondary forest and abandoned coffee plantations after c.5 km, and reaches the village of Kumbira Primero (11°08'S 14°17'E) after 8 km. Here, it is advised to hire a guide to navigate the labyrinthine network of footpaths and old plantation tracks through the forest. With permission from the local villagers, it is possible to camp in the forest.

Gabela Bush-shrike is common, occurring in even quite degraded farmbush. It is best located by its frog-like *wor-worrrrk* call, superficially similar to the closely related Luhder's Bush-shrike *Laniarius luehderi*. It is just one of a suite of bush-shrikes in the area, which includes the commonly heard Perrin's Bush-shrike *Telophorus viridis* and surprisingly common Monteiro's Bush-shrike *Malaconotus montei* (given the paucity of previous records). Monteiro's Bush-shrike is thinly distributed, but several males were heard calling in habitats ranging from near-pristine forest to quite degraded secondary scrub. One needs to check the plumage features (pale lores, dark eye) separating this species from Grey-headed Bush-shrike *M. blanchoti*, which also has been collected in the Gabela District and whose call is virtually identical (although we didn't encounter any in the area). Gabela Helmet-shrike was not found in the main forest, but a party was seen 12 km beyond Kumbira village, in dense woodland. It is perhaps best sought at lower elevations.

Gabela Akalat occurs in small numbers in the forest and adjacent old coffee plantations. Like most akalats, it is easily overlooked. In the

rainy season it was located by its simple, rather low-pitched, three or four-note whistle. Pale Olive Greenbul, an Angolan near-endemic, also is easily overlooked unless one is attuned to its soft *prrrt prrrt* calls and querulous, nasal *where-er-er* song. It appears to be thinly distributed in dense secondary growth as well as in less-disturbed forest higher up the mountain. Red-crested Turacos are much easier to see as they bound through the remnant canopy. They are common, the forest ringing with their raucous choruses. The endemic Hartert's Camaroptera *Camaroptera [brevicaudata] harterti* also is common throughout the forest, whereas Red-backed Mousebird is confined to more open habitats at the forest edge. Grey-striped Francolins occur around the forest fringe, but are shy and retiring.

The forest also supports several birds with localised ranges in west-central Africa. The handsome Falkenstein's Greenbul *Chlorocichla falkensteini* is abundant in secondary bush, and its nasal call is heard continuously. Angola Batis is quite common, often occurring in bird parties with African Blue Flycatchers *Elminia longicauda*, and Yellow-bellied *Hyliota flavigaster* and Southern *Hyliotas H. australis*. Yellow-throated Nicator *Nicator vireo* the smallest of the nicators, is arguably also the most attractive. There are also several subspecies endemic to the Angolan scarp, including isolated populations of Dusky Tit *Parus funereus gabela*, Forest Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas leucosticta reichenowi*, Naked-faced Barbet *Gymnobucco calvus vernayi* and Brown-chested Alethe *Alethe poliocephala hallae*. The drab local form of Hairy-breasted Barbet *Tricholaema hirsuta angolensis* was a minor southerly range extension.

Other, more widespread forest species present include Yellowbill *Ceuthmochares aereus*, Yellow-billed Barbet *Trachyphonus purpuratus*, Buff-spotted *Campethera nivosus* and Brown-eared Woodpeckers *C. caroli*, African Broadbill *Smithornis capensis*, Petit's Cuckoo-shrike *Campephaga petiti*, Slender-billed Greenbul *Andropadus gracilirostris*, Brown Illadopsis *Illadopsis fulvescens*, Rufous Flycatcher Thrush *Neocossyphus fraseri*, Buff-throated Apalis *Apalis rufogularis*, Green Crombec *Sylvietta virens*, Green Hylia *Hylia prasina*, Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher *Trochocercus nitens*, Rufous-



vented **Paradise Flycatcher** *Terpsiphone rufocinerea*, **Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye** *Dyaphorophya concreta*, **Pink-footed Puffback** *Dryoscopus angolensis*, **Superb Sunbird** *Cinnyris superba* and **Grey-headed Negrofinch** *Nigrita canicapillus*. **Mackinnon's Shrike** *Lanius mackinnoni* occurs in the adjacent farmbush.

Venturing above 900 m into less-disturbed (though almost certainly historically logged) forest, **Pulitzer's Longbill** *Macrosphenus pulitzeri* is best located by its repetitive, three-note call. This drab warbler is not particularly shy and can readily be seen moving through the mid-strata. Its most striking feature is its powder-blue eye. Above c.1,000 m, the forest is replaced by sparsely wooded grassland, with forest confined to protected gullies. Along this forest edge we found a family party of **Angola Slaty Flycatchers** *Melaenornis brunneus*, flitting among emergent forest trees and adjacent shrubs. **Ludwig's Double-collared Sunbird** *Cinnyris ludovicensis* also occurs at this elevation, replacing the **Olive-bellied Sunbird** *C. chloropygius* found lower down. But the main reason for slogging above the forest is to find the enigmatic **Angola Cave Chat** *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*, which perches on the lichen-encrusted rocks, superficially resembling a chat, but with a much longer tail. The male utters an ethereal, echoing call lasting two seconds, repeated in bouts of up to five minutes. Other species found at these elevations include **Rockrunner** *Achaetops damarensis* and **Oustalet's Sunbird** *Cinnyris oustaleti*.

Access by car is only reliably possible during the dry season (April–late October). During the rains, sections of the road from Conda become quagmires, impassable to all but the largest-wheeled vehicles. The forest can still be reached on foot from Conda or by requesting a lift on a local tractor. Walking in can be rewarding, as the more open areas near Conda have **Compact Weaver** *Pachyphantes superciliosus* and, once in the farmbush, one is entertained by the many **Pale-billed Firefinches** *Lagonosticta [rubricata] landanae*, **Grey Waxbills** *Estrilda perreini* and **Black-and-white Mannikins** *Spermestes bicolor* and smaller numbers of **Red-faced Crimsonwings** *Cryptospiza reichenovii* and **Red-headed Bluebills** *Spermophaga ruficapilla* that feed on seeds along the edge of the road. When

asking directions, take care to specify Kumbira Primera, as there is a second Kumbira village lying farther south on the road to Seles, below a spectacular granite inselberg on the eastern flank of Njelo Mountain. The latter site has little forest, but did produce a pair of **Dusky Twinspots** *Euschistospiza cinereovinacea*.

### Seles (Oku)

If Kumbira is inaccessible, many of the birds found there occur along the road from Sumbe to Seles. During 2003 this road was in much better condition than that to Gabela, and one could be birding within two hours of leaving Sumbe. We mostly birded around Bango (11°21'S 14°13'E), a small village 14 km west of Seles. Several unprepossessing patches of secondary bush around Bango support a surprisingly fine selection of birds including large numbers of **Pulitzer's Longbills**, at least some **Gabela Akalats**, as well as **Red-crested Turacos** and **White-fronted Wattle-eyes**. Lower down, west of Bango, the road passes through some good-looking forest and dense woodland that may well contain **Gabela Helmet-shrike**. Seles can also be reached directly from Conda, although the road is convoluted, passing via the village of Ganja, and a local guide or interpreter is essential.

### Mombolo and Mt Moco

Paging through Dean's (2000) *Birds of Angola*, Mombolo features prominently for a number of sought-after species, it being the type locality for **Swierstra's Francolin**. On the map, it looks deceptively close to Seles, but the road south is extremely poor. An attempt to reach Mombolo was abandoned at Atôme, after travelling all day from Seles, because of reports that the road to the south was still mined. Atôme was a former UNITA base, and the area from here south to Huambo apparently still contains many mines. However, Huambo can be reached from Lobito (along another poor road), allowing access to Mt Moco. RC spent two nights camped near the base of Mount Moca on the old road that passes the eastern side of the mountain. The turn-off from the main Huambo–Lobito road is easily overlooked (12°19'S 15°08'E), and is 1 km west of a turning to a small village. One can drive to c.1,750 m, 5 km north of the moun-

tain. From there it was an easy walk through miombo woodland and subsistence farms to the plateau at 2,100 m.

Much of the miombo woodland is in good condition, supporting a wide variety of birds, including **Blue Quail** *Coturnix [chinensis] adansonii*, **Rufous-bellied Tit** *Parus rufiventris*, **Green-capped Eremomela** *Eremomela scotops* and **Oustalet's Sunbird**. Above 1,900 m the miombo is gradually replaced by grasslands, with small patches of Afromontane forest. Unfortunately, there was insufficient time to thoroughly search for **Swierstra's Francolin**, because of the time spent exploring access to the mountain. Some of the interesting birds observed at higher elevations included **Angola Lark** *Mirafra angolensis*, **Red-crested Turaco**, **Scarce Swift** *Schoutedenapus myoptilus* and the local races of **Bronzy Sunbird** and **Yellow-bellied Waxbill**.

### Tundavala

This site is much further south than the other areas discussed here, and is probably beyond the range of most birders flying into Luanda. However, it is conveniently situated for birders driving into Angola from Namibia. Several pairs of **Angola Cave Chats** occupy the rocky outcrops, and **Angola Slaty Flycatcher** occurs along the margins of the few small forest patches. Tundavala lies c.16 km from Lubango on a very good road that runs past the brewery (turn at 14°55'S 13°28'E). One can camp at the picnic site in the sole remaining area of miombo woodland. Because of its close proximity to Lubango, the forest has been impacted severely by wood cutting, and this destruction is ongoing. Tundavala is also a known locality for **Swierstra's Francolin** (Dean 2000); one unidentified francolin was heard calling in the grasslands but despite extensive searching it could not be flushed.

### The future?

We have only scratched the surface of this vast region. Much exploring remains to be done, especially north and east of Luanda, where the stunning **Braun's Bush-shrike** and **White-headed Robin Chat** *Cossypha heinrichi* await rediscovery. Our limited observations to date suggest that most of the endemic birds remain locally

common, but the extent of the remaining habitat is unknown. Certainly much forest habitat has been lost. In the mid-1900s, large areas of forest were partially or wholly cleared for coffee plantations (Dean 2001). During the civil war, these plantations were allowed to run wild and have been recolonised by forest birds. Now they are being encroached by subsistence agriculture, and there is talk of a return to commercial coffee growing, despite the current glut on the world market. There is an urgent need to assess the extent of remaining habitat, and the distribution of species of conservation concern within these patches. Birders visiting the region should attempt to explore new areas, and keep accurate records of the birds they encounter. These will be important for conservation efforts currently being initiated, as well as contributing to our understanding of the distribution, abundance and natural history of the key species. Birders should also attempt to provide some support to local communities, to demonstrate that ecotourism may be a viable supplement to agriculture.

### Acknowledgements

We thank Mitsubishi South Africa, the Kissama Foundation, Jorge Jovir and João Guerra of MITC Investments, Henk Burger and John Jones of Wings Over Africa and Rio Longa Lodge, Hans Jornvall, Rui Araujo and Warren McClelland for assistance and support.

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<sup>a</sup>20 Pleasant Place, Pinelands 7405, South Africa.  
E-mail: vangatrs@global.co.za

<sup>b</sup>Birding Africa, 21 Newlands Road, Claremont  
7708, South Africa. E-mails: claire@birdingafrica.com;  
callan@birdingafrica.com; michael@birdingafrica.com

<sup>c</sup>Department of Zoology, Downing Street, University  
of Cambridge CB2 3EJ, UK.

<sup>d</sup>Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape  
Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa. E-mail:  
pryan@botzoo.uct.ac.za

<sup>e</sup>Cassidy Bird Tours, 267 Stead Avenue,  
Queenswood, Pretoria 0001, South Africa. E-mail:  
cassbirds@mweb.co.za

<sup>f</sup>Centro de Estudos e Investigação Científica UCAN,  
Rua Nossa Senhora da Muxima 29, C.P. 2064  
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